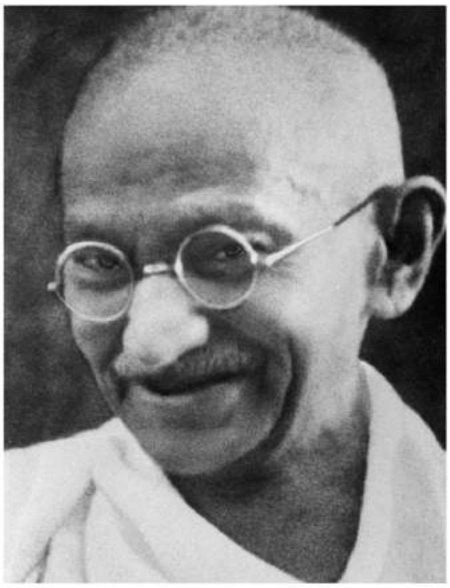
Mahatma Gandhi & Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Question of Justice and Non-Violence

Dr Fr KM GEORGE





The correspondence between Mahatma Gandhi and the renowned German martyr-theologian and pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer is not much known. Going through the brief exchange of letters between the young Lutheran Protestant theologian and Gandhiji we get glimpses of the hard ethical dilemmas European and particularly German Christians faced during the Nazi period, and how some of them looked up to India's political-spiritual leader Gandhi and his Ahimsa-based struggle for India's independence from British colonial rule.

Born in 1906 to German parents in Poland, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was hanged to death in Hitler's Flossenbürg concentration camp at the age of 39. He became a 20th century icon of heroic European resistance to Adolf Hitler's political ideology of National Socialism (Nazism) based on claims of Aryan racist superiority, German supremacy and territorial expansion by the use of militant power, and the hard core policy of eliminating all 'non -Aryan' races particularly the Jews and people of Jewish descent. Bonhoeffer studied at Berlin and Tuebingen universities, and his books like Cost of Discipleship, Letters and Papers from Prison became theological classics. Pastoring two German congregations in London he spent two years there, and also studied at Union Theological Seminary, New York.

Pastor Lic. Dietrich Bonhoeffer
23, Manor Mount. S.E 23.London.

October 17th 1934

Revered Mahatmaji!

It is on account of the most distressing situation in the European countries and in my own country, in Germany, that I dare to approach you personally and I hope you will forgive my doing so. I have been waiting for long time, but now things have advanced so far, that I do not think it justifiable to wait any longer. I know, you have an open ear for every need whereever it be and I trust you will not refuse to give your help and advice to me although you do not know me, and you will forgive my questions.

The great need of Europe and of Germany in particular is not the echomic and political confusion, but it is a deep spiritual need. Europe and Germany are suffering from a dangerous fever and are loosing both selfcontrol and the consciousness of what they are doing. The healing power for all human distress and need, namely Christ's message, is disappointing more and more thinking people on account of its present organisation. There are of course here and there christian individuals who are doing their utmost to move organised Christianity toward a fundamental regeneration, but most of the organised bodies of the Christian Churches would not recognise the real issue. Being myself a christian pastor I find

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The moral question for the pacifist Bonhoeffer and his companions was about the use of violence in face of the demonic power of evil in the form of Hitlerian Nazism.

Young Dietrich had heard about Gandhi and the Indian struggle for independence from his grandmother, a bold and committed Christian who openly defied Hitler's order to boycott all Jewish businesses. Since then he was curious about Gandhi's political and spiritual experiments in India. As a young student, Bonhoeffer first wrote to Gandhi if he could visit his ashram together with a friend, and also enquired about the expenses involved. Gandhi wrote back welcoming them provided they were willing to live on simple vegetarian food and follow the discipline of the ashram community. In that case they would have nothing to pay for their boarding and lodging. The project, however, was not realised probably because of lack of funds or because Bonhoeffer's family was unwilling to send the young man to a far country like India. About his intentions to travel to India to meet with Gandhi, he wrote to his grandmother that "there's more Christianity in their 'paganism' than in the whole of our Reich Church. Of course Christianity did come from the East originally."

In October, 1934 when Hitler was already in power in Germany Bonhoeffer wrote again to Gandhi from London. His letter began thus: "Revered Mahatmaji, it is on account of the most distressing situation in the European countries and in my own country Germany that I dare to approach you personally and I hope you will forgive my doing so". Towards the end of the letter he introduced himself as "twenty eight years old, German, Lecturer of Theology in Berlin University, at present pastor of two German congregations in London...".

The letter said that " [w]e are having great theologians in Germany. They are teaching us great theological thoughts of the Reformation anew. But there is no one to show us the way towards a new Christian life in uncompromising accordance with the Sermon on the Mount. It is in this respect that I am looking to you for help".

When Bonhoeffer wrote to Gandhi he was facing a very deep ethical dilemma. In his own powerful German Protestant church most of the leadership was inclined to support the National Socialist (Nazi) ideology. Bonhoeffer and several others were deeply distressed by the State Church's attitude. In protest they created a movement called the 'Confessing Church' and vigorously opposed Hitler's racist and militant ideology.

In 1943, Bonhoeffer was accused of having ties with a conspiracy to assassinate Hitler and dislodge his regime from power. Consequently, he was arrested and sent away to a concentration camp. On 9th April 1945 he was hanged to death in Flossenbürg concentration camp. Some of his companions and some members of his family were also executed. It happened just a few weeks before the Allied Forces liberated the prisoners of war thus ending World War II and the Nazi rule. Gandhiji was killed three years later in 1948.

The moral question for the pacifist Bonhoeffer and his companions was about the use of violence in face of the demonic power of evil in the form of Hitlerian Nazism. In all of Europe and America, he could not find any reliable spiritual guide, as he himself admits. That is how he came to write to Gandhi. Reinhold Niebuhr, a well known American public theologian and ethicist, and Bonhoeffer's professor at Union Theological Seminary, New York, had warned his young student that the Gandhian method of passive resistance and non-violence in British-ruled India would not be successful against the atrociously violent Nazi regime.

Although the exchange between Gandhi and Bonhoeffer was brief, it brings out very insightful thoughts about the appeal of the unique Gandhian practice and vision. We can only wishfully speculate what would have happened to the world had the young Bonhoeffer come to India and become a follower of Gandhiji in the practice of truth, non-violence and justice. ■